

Shifting proximities

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Shifting proximities

News and 'belonging–security'

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ABSTRACT Perceptions and feelings of belonging and non-belonging, security and insecurity post-9/11 among multi-ethnic news audiences interviewed in Edinburgh are bound up with perceptions of nearness to and remoteness from places, people and threatening events. People's senses of physical, cultural and emotional closeness and distance oscillate as a consequence of different push-and-pull factors encountered in the course of their face-to-face and mediated interactions. National government policy and news media play major roles in constructing senses of closeness or separation. Also significant in the formation of relative senses of proximity are local authorities' responses to diversity, as well as lived experiences. News audience members actively attempt to assert some control over their senses of 'belonging–security'.

KEYWORDS *belonging, distance, diversity, Edinburgh, local, Muslims, news, policy, proximity, security, state, threat*

Introduction

This article is based on ethnographic data from research among multi-ethnic news audiences in Edinburgh, concerned with conceptions and feelings of security and insecurity since 9/11. In order to deliver sufficient ethnographic detail, it focuses principally on two married couples and members of their families and social networks. This close focus on individuals and their interactions with news media, the state, and other security-related actors, reveals processes likely to be relevant beyond the parameters of this particular study. The shifting quality of the participants' senses of physical, cultural and emotional proximity to threats can be discerned in detail, as can the factors behind these fluctuations. Government security policies, news media, and personal experiences act to push and pull participants towards or away from a sense of belonging within Britain. Through their different engagements with, and responses to, news media in particular, the participants can be seen to attempt to assert control over their own sense of 'belonging–security'.

Cross-cutting physical, cultural and emotional proximity and distance are characteristic of migrant and diaspora identities and belonging(s)



(Murji, 2006). However, as distant events and people increasingly pervade contemporary life, complexity and fluidity relating to closeness and/or distance is increasingly involved in the construction of most identities and belonging(s). It is the contention here that senses of dynamic proximity and distance are bound up with perceptions of threat, (in)security and belonging. This 'belonging—security' relationship is particularly pertinent where questions relating to the viability of multicultural society and multicultural citizenship are to the fore (Kymlicka, 1995; Kymlicka and Norman, 2000), and where both individuals and states are 'compelled to cope continuously with the challenge of distant proximities' (Rosenau, 2003: 3).

The discussions with participants about their thoughts and feelings relating to events and news spanned a two-year period which saw a number of security-related issues, including the war in Iraq and the London bombings of July 2005. Several security concerns emerged from the data: world insecurity and terrorism; terrorist attacks in Britain or Scotland; travelling to places affected by terrorism; the danger of reprisals, in the form of abuse and assault; diminishing civil liberties, threats to citizenship rights and diminishing senses of belonging in Britain; and a range of further concerns, including ecological threats. All of these can be subsumed into two overlapping, larger categories. The first relates to the focus on national security issues which citizens are increasingly compelled to negotiate. The second concerns senses of 'being in the world' or what Giddens (1990), following R.D. Laing, refers to as 'ontological security'. This means confidence in the stability of one's identity and the dependability of one's social environment, and its maintenance involves protecting feelings of trust and controlling anxiety (see Moores, 2005; Silverstone, 1993). The interview discussions revealed that, where participants were concerned about the likelihood that they and/or their family and friends may be affected by security-related issues, their evaluations were based on perceptions of physical, cultural and affective distance and proximity to places, people and threatening events.

Relations and perceptions of distance and proximity are not given but created in processes involving the national state, the media, local authorities and people themselves. It is widely accepted that developments in technologically-mediated communications can alter experiences of time and space (Giddens, 1990). Mass media enable people to travel imaginatively (Morley, 2000), and media and communication technologies can liberate people from the constrictions of propinquity (Rosenau, 2003; Silverstone, 2006). Media and communications technologies potentially draw geographically distant people, places and events closer. Furthermore, a sense of being brought near to and/or being pushed away from places, people and events can be imposed by the state through various distancing or 'nearing' strategies (for discussion and examples, see Murji, 2006). Thus the media and the state have a significant bearing on the formation



of senses of 'belonging—security'; but so too can encounters with local authorities (such as local councils, police and educational institutions) and lived experiences more broadly. Moreover, people are not passive in their responses to institutions' capacity to draw them close, or push them away. As Silverstone notes regarding media's potential to 'transform the relationship between distance and proximity' (2006: 65), individuals act selectively and creatively to negotiate a comfortable distance between themselves and the world around them.

Method and discussion

Participants

Each of the two couples focused on here were interviewed on three separate occasions. Pseudonyms have been used to protect their anonymity. Hamida and Masood are in their forties and have three children. They own a small successful retail business and are financially comfortable. Their spacious, comfortable house is situated on a main road which serves as a boundary between an affluent middle-class residential area and a council housing estate. Hamida sometimes helps in their shop but mostly does not work outside the home. The couple are Scottish/British Pakistanis: both were brought by their parents to the north of England as small children and moved to Edinburgh in their early twenties after marrying. Masood has a Higher National Diploma (a vocational qualification) and Hamida left formal education in her mid-teens.

Masood described himself as a 'part-time Muslim' because he does not rigidly adhere to religious prescriptions. In the first interview he defined his orientation in relation to Islam as 'moderate', but also explicitly stated his loyalty to what he referred to as 'the Muslim world' in the face of what he sees as the bullying and double standards to which Muslim countries and peoples are subjected by 'the West'. He stated that he usually voted Conservative in elections. Hamida was more religiously observant, but shared her husband's 'moderate' interpretation of Islamic teachings and his identification with the hardships suffered by Muslims elsewhere in the world. She indicated that she was a disillusioned Labour supporter. Both expressed disdain for the British and American governments' actions and motives relating to Iraq. At the same time, however, they expressed strong feelings of affiliation towards Britain and a particular belonging to Scotland and Edinburgh. Masood actively espouses conformist notions of civic responsibility, entrepreneurship, participatory British citizenship and integrated multicultural society. He is an active member of local and regional commercial and civic organizations and of a local district ethnic minority forum. He emphasized his appreciation of Britain as 'tolerant' and 'liberal', describing it as 'the best country in the world'. Masood and Hamida, like other Scottish Muslim participants in this study, typify the many European and western Muslims who aspire to participate in the



civil life of the societies in which they live while also maintaining their Muslim faith (Ramadan, 2003).

Hamida and Masood maintained a keen interest in the news, particularly relating to Iraq and other national and international security-related issues. They demonstrated accurate, detailed knowledge of past and current news and an understanding of the historical context of issues. Hamida reported habitually watching news broadcasts on terrestrial television and taking every opportunity to watch news on the 24-hour news channels, as well as watching news on satellite channels broadcasting in Urdu. Masood explained that he listened to radio news several times a day, and watched television news in the morning before leaving for work and in the evenings. Their ready and confident responses showed that the topics introduced in the interviews were familiar, and indeed were regular topics of reflection and discussion in their daily lives.

The second couple, Lynne and George, are also in their forties. Their two teenage daughters, Fay and Connie, contributed intermittently to the interviews. George and Lynne are graduates but only George, a manager with a large financial services company in Edinburgh, works outside the home. The family are 'indigenous' Scots, living in a prestigious suburb in a large semi-detached Victorian house. Lynne and her daughters are observant Roman Catholics. George is a Presbyterian by upbringing and sometimes attends church with his wife and daughters. The couple have a relatively conservative and conventional, but also socially conscious, middle-class worldview. Politically, they identify themselves as Labour Party supporters and emphatically 'anti-Tory'. Lynne is actively involved with a justice and peace group that works to raise awareness of global inequality and poverty and lobbies the government on fairtrade issues.

George and Lynne expressed tolerance and acceptance of cultural and religious difference, but in the last interview in February 2006, they revealed feelings of unease regarding what they saw as the 'undermining' of Christian culture and society due to an ethos of 'multicultural' and/or secular society. Also evident was a qualified engagement with a polarized discourse of 'us' and 'them' regarding, in George's terms, 'western capitalist-based democracies' and 'the fundamental Islamic world'. In the first interview in 2005, Lynne asserted her high expectations of politicians and it was apparent that both she and George had a fairly high degree of trust in the government and admiration for Tony Blair. They stated that they 'broadly' supported Blair's decisions and actions regarding Iraq. Some ambivalence about Britain and America's intervention in Iraq became apparent in subsequent interviews, but they largely maintained a belief that Blair's good points outweighed any failings, including mistakes in relation to Iraq.

George, Lynne and their daughters rarely watch television news and only George expressed a significant interest in news at all. He described how he 'like[d] to keep listening to the news' and carried a pocket radio or



listened to the car radio. He also regularly checked the BBC news website at work and newspaper websites at home on Sundays. He explained that his news consumption was driven by an interest in being generally informed about 'headlines'. He was interested in the situation in Iraq, but less interested in the ongoing coverage relating to it. Lynne said that she was not very interested in news but listened to the radio during the day and heard news bulletins regularly. She tended not to be attentive to news but took some interest in 'bigger more political stories', news relating to justice and peace issues (e.g. world trade talks and environmental concerns), and local issues. Their daughters said that they did not listen to or watch news very often. George's knowledge of past and current news was more accurate than his wife's, which was at times limited, confused and vague. Both indicated a loss of interest in long-running news stories and acknowledged their restricted understanding of the context of international security issues. Lynne often hesitated in responding to topics raised in the interviews, and both responded as if forming their views at the time or, in George's words: 'I'm making this up as I go along, you can tell.' For them, evidently, such reflexive examinations of security issues, their implications and their own responses to them, were novel experiences.

Shaping proximity and distance

All the participants in the study displayed concern about global polarization, an acceptance that terrorism would become more widespread, and (prior to the London bombings in 2005) a sense that a terrorist attack in Britain was likely. Echoing the views of other participants, Masood noted: 'We've more chance of being a target than maybe France or Germany or any of the other countries.' However, a different risk ensuing from national security issues impinged more on Hamida and Masood's peace of mind: the threat of reprisal attacks against themselves and their family. In the first interview they related that they had felt less secure in Britain since the events of 9/11, and even less so since the Iraq War. Masood explained that he had even considered moving house so as to be less of an obvious target for abuse or attack by individuals who might focus their anger on his family. He told me:

I think about things ... I'm more aware that I live in maybe too prominent an area and too prominent a location. We are thinking of having this house extended ... I was a little bit reluctant because of things that have happened over the last few years. Iraq, erm, mainly Iraq, and I had a little bit of a worry in the back of my mind if too many body bags start coming back into the UK, and maybe if there is a terrorist attack in this country, it will have adverse effects. I mean, I have the utmost regard for most of the police. Like I said, I sit on the ... police ethnic minority forum. I see them once every month or once every couple of months [laugh]. I've played golf with the assistant chief constable and what have you ... After the 9/11 attacks they showed so much concern. I had people come in, police officers come into the shop: 'Are you



okay? Has there been any trouble?’ I thought, if there is something drastic, something big happens here. Highly prominent house, bus stop’s across the road and I wanted to move away from the main road.

This type of concern relates to how people are (and understand themselves to be) identified by others. No ‘indigenous’ Scottish participant raised this issue, but several other Scottish Pakistani participants discussed ‘reprisals’ in the form of abuse and assaults in Edinburgh, Britain and elsewhere. So did predominantly Scottish Pakistani attendees at a ‘community reassurance’ meeting held by the City of Edinburgh Council and Lothian and Borders Police, on 19 July 2005, following the suicide bombings in London. In the interviews after those bombings, the Scottish Pakistani participants referred to the vandalism of one of Edinburgh’s mosques and to a serious assault on a young Scottish Pakistani boy in the city which had occurred soon after the bombings. These incidents would have become known in some cases through exchanges with other Scottish Pakistanis in the city, but the impact of media news on their perceptions of cultural proximity to risk was also evident. Both prior to and following the London bombings, several Scottish Pakistani participants referred to attacks on American Sikhs, mistaken for Muslims, following 9/11. Hamida also pointed to news of attacks on Dutch Muslims following the murder of the film director, Theo van Gogh (a story current at the time of interview):

Just now that – was it in Holland where this – was he a film director? ... He was killed because they had used Koranic verses on a woman’s body, if you remember or not, and he got killed. And after that I picked up a newspaper and I read it, and there’s been a number of attacks on mosques in Amsterdam itself ... So it does happen – people do take things into their own hands.

In addition to worries about retaliation, Hamida and Masood also expressed fears relating to threats to their belonging within Britain and their rights as citizens. This type of concern ensues from the government’s management of security and diversity in principle and/or how this has an impact on people’s senses of freedom and belonging. Some ‘indigenous’ Scottish participants expressed concern about these issues – for example, in relation to changes and proposed changes to security policy – but discussed them in terms of abstract principles. Lynne and George talked about the home secretary’s proposals to introduce house arrest without trial for terror suspects in terms of wider implications for the values of freedom and democracy. Several Scottish Pakistani participants also alluded to the undermining of principles of democracy and freedom. However, for most of these latter participants, matters of principle were clearly secondary to worries about restrictions on personal freedoms and a subjective sense of unease and vulnerability relating to their status of belonging to Britain.

In the first interview with Masood and Hamida, they described an incident at Heathrow airport on their return from a holiday in Pakistan,



when Masood had been detained and aggressively questioned by an airport security official for no apparent reason other than that he was a Pakistani Muslim. Masood stated that this experience had dented his strong feelings of belonging to Britain: 'There was a time I would have been prepared to die for this country', but this experience had undermined such feelings to some degree. Here the couple recall how the incident made them feel:

Hamida: We could see what was going on and my daughters were quite upset as well. And we thought, here we are we're in a civilized country now – we're in a civilized country, look how they are treating us ... From two o'clock onwards we had to wait there until 10 o'clock, our last flight, because of that incident.

Interviewer: So how did you feel about that?

Hamida: Very angry, very, very angry.

Interviewer: So did you feel angry, Masood?

Masood: Yes, extremely.

Hamida: And you feel a little bit humiliated as well because you are singled out and stopped. I mean if he had used a proper way of ...

Interviewer: Courtesy?

Hamida: Yeah – it wouldn't have been so bad.

Such experiences are shared in interactions within family and friendship networks and influence others' perceptions of threatened 'belonging–security'. Here, a group of Masood's friends, relatively wealthy and well-educated Scottish/British Pakistani businessmen, discuss the issue (prior to July 2005):

Shabir: Obviously, all the terrorists, they label them Muslims, right? So because you are a Muslim, you're associated with that group ...

Jamil: I think some of the laws they were bringing out for – anti-terrorism laws – could really affect us in ways. I mean, if you go out, I mean Masood came back from one of the times in Pakistan and he got, you know, he got held up for four hours, and his wife and his children.

Like fears of retaliation, feelings of cultural proximity to threats of diminishing civil liberties and citizenship rights are linked to the participants' understanding of how others identify them as Muslim, and thus as 'the enemy within' (we will see shortly that these men experience themselves being distanced in 'racial' as well as religious–cultural terms). Masood, Hamida and their friends referred to the negative focus by politicians and the news media on immigration and 'asylum-seekers' prior to the 2005 election. Shabir, Babil and Jamil discussed the influence that this had on others' perceptions of them as increasingly distanced from 'Britishness' and as a burden on the British economy. In the last interview, Masood expressed the view that the tabloid press had presented



the London bombings in a manner designed to foster negative attitudes towards immigration and ‘asylum-seekers’. He criticized the way that the media devoted disproportionate coverage to negative incidents involving immigrant people or ‘asylum-seekers’ and gave minimal coverage to their positive contributions.

The Scottish Pakistani participants’ sense of proximity to threats to their civil liberties, and of being actively distanced from ‘Britishness’, can be seen to result from a number of interrelated factors. Central among these is the focus on Muslims in the government’s pre-emptive ‘War against Terror’. So far this has concentrated on predominantly Muslim countries, while internal security policy in practice focuses on Muslims in Britain. The predominant representations of Muslims and/or people from visible minority ethnicities, in the news (and other media content) that Scottish/British Pakistanis see, hear and read, work together with government responses to security issues to undermine their sense of being accepted as British. Personal experiences and the experiences of known others powerfully reinforce this effect.

Shifting senses of proximity and distance

Personal experiences within local settings can also oppose these positioning forces and serve to decrease a sense of distance from belonging and proximity to insecurity. In the last interview with Hamida, she explained that in the weeks following 7 July she had been very frightened about potential reprisals. She described an incident, soon after the bombings, in which her sister had been pushed and verbally abused in a shopping centre in London. Hamida recounted that on hearing about this, her ‘heart sank’. She felt ‘saddened’ and ‘shocked’ that an ‘ordinary person’ could be victimized in this way. She explained, however, that she and Masood had experienced no backlash in Edinburgh, and with the passing of time her fears were diminishing. I asked Masood whether he was still worried, and he replied:

Perhaps not as much as I did prior to July ... I do sit on the ... minority forum and there is always two or three chief policemen there and a couple of others. And you also have the council leaders there, and they have done quite a lot to strengthen my faith.

This points to the potential of such local encounters with official policy to pull in an apparently contrary direction to national security policies. The significance of local factors is also evident in the contrast between Hamida and Masood’s experiences in Edinburgh and that of Hamida’s sister in London.

Despite Hamida and Masood’s diminished concerns, their sense of shifting proximity to belonging and of distance from the risk of backlash is precarious. In the last interview, Hamida said that she expected further terrorist incidents in Britain because the underlying causes of terrorism,



as she understood them, were not being addressed. A further attack would resurrect her fears:

Sometimes you have that fear – will things get worse? Will there come a time when we'll get sent back to Pakistan?

Recently, because of this lingering underlying fear, she and Masood had reluctantly decided to retain property they owned in Pakistan – a precaution Masood described as 'a security'.

Lynne and George's senses of security in terms of belonging are also subject to some instability, although their perceptions of distance are less distinct, and the potential consequences of the realization of any threat are less drastic. As noted, this couple felt uneasy about changes that they perceived in British society. Here Lynne describes her feeling of vulnerability invoked by altered conceptions of Britishness:

I have absolutely no problem ... with people of different 'race' or different religions but – and I also appreciate that there was a time when this wasn't a Christian country ... Christians made this country Christian, so there had already been a takeover bid. I think I feel vulnerable actually, I think maybe I feel vulnerable ... Our culture and our kind of morals and our legal beliefs are all based on Christian principles and that won't necessarily stand true in the future.

As noted earlier, the couple typically formed their responses to issues at the time of the interview. Initially, Lynne couched her concerns about multicultural society in terms of a threat posed by the Islamization of culture and law, but in discussion with George she was quickly convinced that this was improbable. In the process of this discussion, George identified secularization as the distancing dynamic threatening his sense of belonging:

George: What I see is that we have moved from being a Christian-based culture to being a multicultural society – whatever that means. I think the essence of it for me – I'm making this up as I go along, you can tell – is I'm not sure what kind of belief system our laws, for example, are now based on. I don't think it's being replaced by a Muslim-based. I would absolutely not go that far and I don't see that as a ...

Lynne: A likely ...

George: Likelihood at all. I think I'm more concerned actually that it's being replaced by what politicians think we should do.

Lynne: It will be some soft option down the middle, won't it?

George: It's almost what's convenient.

For Lynne and George too, local authority policies were significant, but for them they decreased their sense of secure belonging. Lynne expressed annoyance with 'political correctness' at a local school:

I did hear in [name of school] people were not allowed to say 'Happy Christmas', and I think that's just ridiculous.



George connected his growing awareness of an altered conception of British society to the London bombings of 7 July 2005:

I'm much more conscious of not liking this phrase 'a multicultural society' and we're no longer a Christian-based society. That I find is bothering me more, and I think part of that is actually related in some way to July.

He suggested that he might have registered links made in the news media between the bombings and debates on multiculturalism:

I've come to this vague feeling that we're losing something here 'cause the Christian-based ethos is gone ... 'cause I know there has been coverage in the news which I have picked up, which has suggested that – 'backlash' is too strong a word for it – but there is a desire at some levels to redress this. To say: maybe we shouldn't be moving towards the multicultural society, maybe we should actually be reinforcing our views, saying we should be a Christian society and sticking to that. I'm not sure ... if I'm relating to that ... But certainly that story the London bombings to me feels indirectly linked, or it feels likely to be indirectly linked, to people saying or having a reaction to the extreme Muslim perspective that has been put forward.

This points again to the part that news can play in constructing relative senses of insecurity, in terms of being identified or self-identifying with Britishness.

Perceptions of physical as well as cultural distance to risk and insecurity are subject to fluctuations and instability. As noted previously, a general acceptance of the possibility of a terrorist attack in Britain was evident among the participants prior to the London bombings in July 2005. In terms of physical distance, virtually all of the participants considered Scotland and Edinburgh to be less likely targets than London. Lynne and George accepted that Britain was at risk from a terrorist attack, but expressed the view that they and their family were, on the whole, distant from such risks. This accords with social psychological research suggesting that the reporting of crime in other locations increases people's senses of security in their own area (e.g. Heath, 1984). George and Lynne also expressed this type of comparative security in relation to reports of natural disasters in other parts of the world. They perceived themselves to be remote from national security issues generally and those associated with the Iraqi war in particular. George remarked:

The reality is that the wars that have existed in our lifetime actually have been more distant, the effects of them have been more distant. What's happening in Iraq just now isn't directly changing our life in the way that the Second World War would have changed the life of our parents or grandparents. So it's something we watch on TV and then get on with our lives more.

Over the course of the interviews, however, George, Lynne and their daughter, Fay, revealed how their perceptions of physical distance from risk and insecurity are susceptible to flux. They talked about how news reports



had generated concern and increased their sense of physical proximity to risk. To illustrate this, on more than one occasion they alluded to news in December 2002 relating to the arrest of nine Algerian men in Edinburgh charged with offences in contravention of section 57 of the Terrorism Act 2000. That these charges were later dropped received considerably less coverage than the arrests. In the following extract from our first interview, the family refer to this story and to more current reports, indicating how such news affects perceptions of physical proximity to danger:

George: There is this general air of fear that something may happen, which is there, it's more prevalent from time to time. And again with me it's more prevalent when there is a news story that brings it close to home ...

Lynne: Like today.

George: What was today?

Lynne: Denying or not confirming reports that they put – not confirming reports that they had thwarted lots of plans.

George: Yeah, I saw some of that yesterday.

Interviewer: What was that?

George: There was news coverage yesterday – one of the newspapers covered a story that said that [the] British secret service had thwarted an Al-Qaeda plan to fly planes into Canary Wharf.

Lynne: And there were lots of, there was more than that. It was a whole bunch of scenarios, but they weren't confirming or denying it. [laughs]

George: The ones that really brought it home for me was when there was arrests in Edinburgh and there was a lot of coverage that maybe the Hogmanay party New Year's Eve street celebration was a target.

Fay: I remember that.

George: And that, that scared me.

Fay: 'Cause like, London would be bad – it would be Britain, but Edinburgh is really home.

George and Fay's remarks here suggest a shift from a vague sense of insecurity to a more immediate threat, coupled with a distinction between cultural proximity to the nation as a whole and the physical proximity of locality which is equated with the affective proximity of 'really home'.

Senses of physical distance, as well as senses of cultural distance, are influenced by local events and experiences in addition to state responses to security issues and news relating to them. At the beginning of July 2005, prior to and during the Group of Eight (G8) Conference held in Scotland, Edinburgh was the focus of unprecedented police and security activity, witnessing violent protests and disruption which featured prominently in the news until the terrorist attacks took place in London. In the last interview, George, Lynne and Fay revealed how these local events and news



reports of them had brought risks closer to home. The violent activities of some protesters were geographically close, and this sense of proximity was increased by the fact that the company in Edinburgh where George worked had been warned of possible attacks by anti-capitalist protesters. Lynne and George described how they purposefully sat down to watch television news in the evenings before and during the G8 conference, just as all the participants in this study consumed news more actively when perceived proximity to risk increased (cf. Althaus, 2002; Sancho, 2003). Fay explained why she was more interested in news at this time, in terms of her sense of physical and affective proximity to risk and insecurity:

Probably because it's in Edinburgh ... We were talking about it and I know Dad wasn't exactly affected, but people who knew Dad were affected, and it could have been Dad – and it was, sort of like, personal.

However, as will be explained later, George's personal experiences during this period of disruption in Edinburgh prompted him to withdraw from news in order to create some distance from the acute sense of ontological insecurity that he experienced.

Managing distance and proximity

We have seen that people's sense of proximity to 'belonging–security' are variously, sometimes in contrary directions, affected by news reporting of government responses to state security, as well as by those responses themselves; also by the ways in which local authorities engage with multiculturalism; and by people's specific encounters with these and other experiences. But the participants also revealed ways in which, self-consciously or not, they exert some control over the imposition of these dynamics. For example, from time-to-time the participants referred to their discomfort at watching particular images or reports on television news, and alluded to their more or less conscious withdrawal of attention from such news. In general, the participants' patterns of news interests and consumption can be seen to be a means of managing the potential of news to undermine ontological security. For example, a member of George and Lynne's social network, Ella, described how she was disinclined to pay attention to news concerning environmental threats, tending to 'blot out' such coverage so that she would 'be able to get on with life and not to be permanently worried'. These remarks echo Giddens' discussion of how people deal with potential anxiety, so as not to 'paralyse ordinary day-to-day life' (1990: 132).

George's physical and emotional proximity to events during the G8 protests in Edinburgh in July 2005 prompted him to respond in a comparable way. He explained that he, like Lynne, had initially had 'a heightened consciousness' of news relating to the protests, but his personal experiences of the situation had made watching this news uncomfortable. He recounted



an incident during this period when he had been talking on the phone to a junior colleague in the same company, working in another building, on a street which had been blocked off by police during the protests. George related experiencing distressing feelings of being powerless to assist his endangered colleagues, and later found that he could not watch news coverage of the situation:

George: So it became very real, extremely real, far too real for me and so to a certain extent I watched some of the news coverage ... but I actually almost found it too personal. Didn't like watching it and didn't watch it as much ...

Interviewer: Can I just pick up there George and ask: what do you mean, it became too personal and you didn't like watching it? Why didn't you like watching it then?

George: Because I was conscious that some of my friends – people I actually knew – had felt really threatened by it and I felt that threat too. You know, speaking to Tom on the phone three times over lunchtime and the first time he said, 'It's kind of mildly entertaining, there's some strange people out in the street and we're all watching.' The second time: 'I'm starting to, I'm starting to get a bit nervous, I think you should know this doesn't feel good,' and the third time he said: 'The police have said, you have to stay in the building, I just saw somebody trying to climb in the window,' and I could hear someone in the background shouting at staff, 'Get away from the windows, please!' and thought, 'Oh.' So I took it quite emotionally. It was actually as his manager and the manager of all those people there I felt really powerless and just awful, really horrible. So I watched some of it at night and really, just kind of, it brought that back, I suppose.

Lynne's general detachment from news probably relates to her relative sense of security. Her trust in the government relieves her of the need to be particularly attentive because ultimately, issues are felt to be in 'safe hands':

This is why I think trust comes into it as well because I don't want to get involved in the minute details ... You have to be really knowledgeable actually to make an informed ... I don't think most people in the country make a remotely informed reaction to anything, because they don't have the information at their hand, the depth of knowledge of the subject ... I'm not interested in having the depth of knowledge. I'm not prepared to educate myself to that level where I can make a really informed decision about something. Therefore I have to trust the politicians who do have that depth of knowledge.

Her reluctance to engage with news seems related to her desire to protect this trust in order to maintain her peace of mind. It minimizes any dissonance which might be caused by contradictions arising from being confronted by inconsistencies.

In contrast, Hamida and Masood's experiences and senses of proximity to insecurity, and their distrust of the government's motives and actions, inform their involved engagement with news. By maintaining their



significantly, their awareness of how these are being interpreted, they attempt to exert some limited control over their sense of insecurity. Thus, they and other Scottish Pakistani participants reported reading the popular tabloid press, which they abhorred, in order to know how events (and ‘Muslims’) were being represented and interpreted, and therefore how they were likely to be perceived by those who read these papers. However, as we saw with Hamida’s reference to news about retaliation attacks in Amsterdam, news consumption can increase the sense of proximity to insecurity even as increased knowledge provides some sense of control: media play an ambivalent role in the mediation of security and anxiety (cf. Moores, 2005).

One means by which Hamida and Masood negotiated this contradiction, and resisted the imposition of distance from their belonging within Britain, was by engaging in reflexive discussions about security issues and news with friends. Hamida regularly discussed news with her female friends, and Masood with his male friends (except for Farsayab, a Scottish Iranian, all are Scottish/British Pakistanis). In the first interview, Masood noted that these discussions were a significant part of his news culture, describing his friends’ divergent standpoints and how they debated various issues: ‘You learn other people’s views and you learn ... from each other’s interpretation.’ This study observed and participated in a discussion with this group of trusted friends, among whom experiences were shared and issues and news relating to them were evaluated and elaborated (see Thompson, 1995, on audiences’ ‘discursive elaboration’ of media messages). Differences in political allegiances, background knowledge and interpretations within this group prevented any automatic mutual confirmation of viewpoints, as when one member alluded to a notorious conspiracy theory:

Jamil: Why wasn’t there a single Jew in that 9/11 building?

Babil: That’s an irrelevant argument.

Shabir: There were, there were some Jews in there.

Babil: That’s the weakest argument ...

Their friendship may allow these men some resistance, providing them with a space to freely articulate challenges to the imposition of distance, to reaffirm communally their status of belonging within Britain and, as the following extract suggests, express their affective belonging:

Shabir: You’re not accepted. Generally here as well – yeah, you’re British on paper [and] everything but ... I don’t know whose fault it is, but it’s just the colour of your skin.

Jamil: I think it is the colour of your skin ...

Shabir: The colour of your skin and you’re treated as a ...

Interviewer: So when you say you don’t feel British, do you mean that you feel that other people don’t accept you as British?



Shabir: Oh yeah, of course – simple as that, yeah. And you say, like, ‘I’m British’, ‘Yeah, on paper you’ve got a British passport but you’re not British’ [laughs] You know, the prime example of this: we go on holidays quite a lot and you go into European countries, even in any country ... they’re looking at your passport and they say, ‘Where do you come from?’ ‘I come from Scotland, England, yeah – I’m British.’ ‘You’re not British.’ I mean, even they tell you that – foreign – they say to you, ‘No[t] British, yeah, you have a British passport but you’re either Indian or you’re Pakistani or you’re Iranian.’ So even here it’s even more [like] you’re not accepted ...

Interviewer: Okay, in terms of, like, the legal elements ...

Shabir: Oh yeah.

Interviewer: Do you feel ...

Shabir: Yes oh yes, yes.

Interviewer: And do you feel that you can participate and be active in citizenship?

Shabir: Oh indeed, yes.

Babil: Yes.

Farsayab: Yes.

Shabir: Yes, we vote, we pay our taxes.

Farsayab: We’re all citizens.

Shabir: We, you know, we worry about everything that happens to the country, we, I mean, we would go and fight for Britain.

Farsayab: Law-abiding citizens.

Shabir: We are British in every sense of the word and we feel that way.

Such friendship networks may represent alternative arenas in which news and events, opinions and interpretations are voiced and evaluated, out of which emerge loose frames of agreement on the relative veracity of accounts, plausibility of positions and legitimacy of actions, and where relative positionings, in terms of proximity and distance to ‘belonging–security’, are resisted or defended.

Conclusion

The examples of Masood and Hamida and George and Lynne illustrate intimate relationships between belonging and security. Different perceptions and experiences of belonging within Britain impact strongly on senses of proximity to security. ‘Belonging–security’ is clearly highly unstable. It is susceptible to sometimes contradictory national and local government responses to security and diversity, to news media representations of these, and to personal experiences, which variously pull and push threatening events, places and people closer or further away. Scottish/British Muslim



people (and others from visibly distinguishable minority ethnic groups) can be particularly vulnerable to this deeply unsettling instability of sense of belonging and security.

The two families, differently positioned within multi-ethnic Edinburgh, have differing concerns and experiences but shared aspirations for belonging and security. These aspirations are potentially undermined by acts of terror and other security-related incidents in the UK and other parts of the world. However, in experiential terms, people's ontological security – their confidence in their identities and their assurance of their secure place in the world – is manifestly impeded and disrupted by the constructions of closeness and distance to security-related events and to religious and ethnic cultural diversity which the state and the media impose. These constructions largely produce both the fear of Muslims (and of diversity more generally) which is experienced even by people of goodwill, and the sense of threat and persecution experienced by many Scottish/British Muslim people. The examples here show how people's engagement with news can represent a means of managing their sense of closeness and distance to people, places and threatening events, and hence their 'belonging–security'. For Muslims particularly, talk within trusted friendship groups about news, security and belonging may allow for some limited resistance and challenge to externally attributed and imposed relations of proximity and distance which threaten their ontological security. The experiences of these individuals – of being thrust in and out of belonging and security, and of attempting to control these shifts – offer some insight into the processes involved, and what is at stake, in wider contemporary changes in the negotiation of multicultural society.

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